



The killing of hundreds of Shia Muslim members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), by Nigerian army soldiers from December 12 to 14, 2015, appears to have been wholly unjustified.

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry set up by the government should be sufficiently independent and impartial to hold those responsible to account.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 16 witnesses to the killings and five others, including local authorities, who said that Nigerian army soldiers fired on Shia Muslim members of the group at three locations in Zaria, in northern Nigeria. The army said its confrontation with the Shia sect members who had erected a makeshift roadblock near a mosque resulted from an assassination attempt on the army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Tukur Buratai, whose convoy was passing by. In an internal military document seen by Human Rights Watch, the army said protesters appeared to be taking up positions near the back of the convoy.

“The Nigerian military’s version of events does not stack up,” said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “It is almost impossible to see how a roadblock by angry young men could justify the killings of hundreds of people. At best it was a brutal overreaction and at worst it was a planned attack on the minority Shia group.”

The army carried out attacks at the Hussainiya Baqiyyatullah mosque and religious center, at the home of the Shiite leader, Sheikh Ibrahim Al Zakzaky, in the Gyellesu neighborhood and at the sect’s burial ground, Daral-Rahma, over the course of two days. At least 300 Shia sect members, and likely many more, were killed and hundreds more injured, according to witnesses in at least two of the sites and a hospital source. Soldiers quickly buried the bodies in mass graves without family members’ permission, making it difficult to determine an accurate death toll.

Although some people threw stones and had sticks, there has been no credible information that any soldiers were injured or killed.

The Islamic Movement of Nigeria is a Shia sect with close ties to Iran based in Zaria, Kaduna state. It began in the 1980s and is led by Sheik Zakzaky, who was inspired by Iran's revolutionary movement when he traveled there. The sect has an estimated 3 million followers spread across Nigeria. It is separate from Boko Haram, a radical Islamic group also operating in northern Nigeria, whose members have attacked Shia and others.

Under international human rights law governing the use of force during policing operations such as this, the intentional use of lethal force is only permitted when strictly unavoidable, to protect life.

On December 17, 2015, the Kaduna state governor, Malam Nasir El Rufai, announced the establishment of a [state Judicial Commission of Inquiry](#) into the incident. In his news conference, the governor listed a range of grievances against the Shia sect, including how road traffic had been disrupted during Shiite processions and the sect's disregard for Nigerian government authorities.

President Muhammadu Buhari has yet to make any public statement on the killings. On December 18, a presidential spokesperson said that the incident was "a military affair."

Principle 22 of the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, applicable to the Nigerian armed forces in this situation, stipulates that, "Governments and law enforcement agencies shall ensure that an effective review process is available and that independent administrative or prosecutorial authorities are in a position to exercise jurisdiction in appropriate circumstances." Under the same principles, Nigerian authorities are bound to ensure effective investigations.

"Characterizing this terrible carnage against Shiites in Zaria as 'a military affair' is shocking," Bekele said. "President Buhari should ensure the military's appalling track record of serious human rights abuses is halted and does not continue under his term in office."

For details of the events on December 12 through 14, witness accounts, and information about the sect, please see below.

The Events at Zaria

Witnesses who were at the Hussainiyah mosque and religious center said that dozens of soldiers took up position at the mosque at around midday on December 12, 2015, at least an hour before the army chief of staff was due to pass by. [Video footage](#) shot by sect members and posted on YouTube appears to show soldiers calmly taking up positions around the mosque before the shootings began.

Multiple witnesses interviewed separately by Human Rights Watch at different locations in Kaduna and Zaria, on December 17 and 18, said that without any provocation, the soldiers fired on people coming out of the mosque, initially killing an estimated five people and injuring others, including children attending classes at the center.

A 14-year-old girl attending a math class told Human Rights Watch on December 18 that she was shot as she walked out of the center with other children.

Faced by angry IMN members protesting the shooting, the soldiers at the mosque retreated out of sight. The group members erected a barricade of stones, blocking the road to stop the soldiers from approaching the mosque again.

Shortly thereafter, at about 2:30 p.m., a convoy with the army chief of staff was halted at the barricade. A [video](#) of the December 12 events on Sokoto Road, near the Hussainiyah mosque, was released by the military on December 16. It shows men in military uniform attempting to talk to scores of angry young men, some holding stones, sticks and, in one case, a machete. The video does not show what happened next, only the convoy driving through a cleared road.

Later that day (December 12), the [military spokesperson said](#), “The Shiite Sect on the orders of their leader, Ibrahim Alzak-zaky today [this] afternoon in Zaria attacked the convoy of the chief of army staff....The barricade was obviously a deliberate attempt to assassinate the chief of army staff and members of his entourage.” The military video shows no attempts by sect members to attack the army chief of staff nor how the road was cleared.

A sect member who was at the barricade said the young men “tried to explain why we were concerned that they seemed to be focusing on us. But before long they just started shooting

their way through the barricade.” Witnesses described soldiers opening fire on the crowd, which included women and children. Some of the soldiers did not leave with the convoy but continued to fire, including into the mosque, where hundreds sought refuge for the next 30 hours.

At around 10 p.m., soldiers also advanced to Gyellesu neighborhood, about 10 kilometers from the mosque, toward Zakzazy’s house. Fearing Zakzazy might be arrested or killed, hundreds of sect members gathered at his house to protect him. Witnesses said soldiers fired at random on the large crowd of men, women, and children, some of whom were throwing stones and carrying sticks. The firing continued throughout the night, intensifying in the early morning until Zakzazy and his wife, Zeenatu, were arrested on December 14. Witnesses said that both had multiple gunshot wounds. Both remain in custody.

Soldiers also deployed to Daral-Rahma cemetery, an important Shiite religious location with a number of Shia shrines, 12 kilometers from Zaria.

On December 14, in a [news conference](#) after the events, Major General Adeniyi Oyebade, responsible for the 1 Mechanized Army Division in Kaduna, said he had deployed more troops to the three sites after receiving information that IMN members were mobilizing there. He said he gave instruction “to secure the three sites and bring the sect leader into custody.” He said his forces “came under attack and the resulting confrontation led to casualties on both sides.” He did not provide any figures or further information about government casualties. He claimed that Zakzaky and his wife were taken into “protective custody.” The chief of army staff said on December 17 that the military handed the couple over to [appropriate authorities](#) for prosecution. He did not say for what offence they would be charged.

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that the military detained hundreds of IMN members, many of whom were later transferred to police custody. The police released 191 sect members between December 15 and 18, including 61 non-Shia Almajiri boys – Koranic school pupils – and women with babies and small children. The police also released 46 others who had been transferred to the police headquarters in Kaduna. Many of sect members who spoke to Human Rights Watch said they had been detained with serious gunshot wounds and other injuries and that they received little or no medical treatment.

The 14-year-old girl who was shot said that soldiers picked her up, put her in a military vehicle,

and took her to a nearby military base where she was given basic medical treatment to stop the bleeding. Soldiers took her to the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital the next day, December 13, with 16 other wounded Shiite detainees. The injured said they were transported in the same military truck with at least 100 corpses from the shootings, which were deposited in the hospital morgue.

Lists compiled by sect members from the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital records show that between December 13 and 15, soldiers deposited more than 300 bodies at the hospital's four morgues. When soldiers attempted to bring another truckload of bodies on December 16, they were turned back due to lack of space, a hospital staff told Human Rights Watch. Later the same day, soldiers returned to collect all the bodies, hospital staff said. Sect members told Human Rights Watch that according to information from their members and from photographs they had seen, the corpses were [buried in mass graves](#) in three locations in Kaduna state: along Kaduna to Birnin Gwari road, near Udawa village, and along the Ikara road.

Witness Accounts

A 46-year-old woman who was visiting relatives in a house close to Zakzaky's house in Gyellesu told Human Rights Watch that she was awakened by the sounds of gunshot on December 12:

I heard shots. I ran over to Sheikh's house to find out what was happening. That's when I saw so many people on the street. There were soldiers at the end of the road. They were shooting. The bullets were just flying everywhere, hitting and killing many people. I saw two children who looked like they could be aged 7 and 12 writhing in pain on the ground. They were bleeding.

Just then I saw one of my five sons. They had gone to Hussainiyah [mosque] that morning. So I asked him to help me move the older one whose injury was worse into a house. When we came back to pick the second child, the soldiers had noticed him. We ran away as they shot him point blank in the head. He was only a child. I fell as a wall caved in on me when the soldiers threw a bomb toward the house.

That was the last I saw of my son or any of his brothers till today. What really is our offense? Why do they hate us so much? I don't know how I survived. It was at the hospital they found

out I had 12 bits of shrapnel lodged in my back.

A 30-year-old man who was at Hussainniyah mosque and religious centre:

I was at the center as early as 9 a.m. on Saturday. At about noon we heard some noise. When we came out we noticed about 60 soldiers in front and at the back of the center. We became jittery. Some of my Muslim brothers went to ask them why they were there. They said it's because the COAS was going to pass and they did not trust us. We told we were not comfortable with their presence. We decided to set up a barricade so that if they start to shoot it would take time before they get to us.

By around 2:30 p.m. when a long military convoy came we tried to explain why we were concerned that they seemed focused on us. Before long they just started shooting their way through the barricade. Up to 50 of us including women and children were killed. The rest of us fled in different directions.

I hid in a gutter for a long time. Then I noticed at around 10 p.m. that more soldiers came. They took positions around Hussainniyah. Not long after I got a call that the same thing was happening at Gyellesu. So I crawled my way out of the area and ran to the Sheikh's house to help protect him.

Around 2 a.m. those still stuck at Hussainniyah called to say the soldiers were announcing that everyone should come out of the center. When they did not respond, soldiers started throwing grenades into the building. We could hear the explosions over the phone. There were more than 500 people in that place. We lost count of the numbers after they told us of the 175th death. After that we could no longer reach anyone there. I believe there are still some hiding around the place afraid and injured.

A 15-year-old boy who was stuck inside Hussainniyah mosque:

We could not come out because the soldiers were still outside. We waited for them to leave so we can go home. But we soon noticed they became more. They came with tanks (armored personnel carriers) and were just shooting and shooting. Many of us got shot. Some died fast and some slowly. It was terrible. So when the soldiers shouted on loudspeakers that we should come out I went with some women and other children.

I was already wounded in the leg. I didn't want to die. They tied our hands at back. With rope. Only us men and boys. Then they took us in trucks to their barracks and put all of us in one room. There were up to 50 of us in the room. The soldiers did not ask us anything but some of them will come and kick us with their boots and say "Look at you. What did your teacher give you to make you behave like this?" Then they will hit us some more. They did not touch the women and young children. Only us men and boys even though many of us were seriously injured.

We were there from that Sunday morning until Tuesday [December xx] when they brought us to the hospital. They did not give us any food. Not even water. But later they said those who had money should bring it. They used it to buy pure water for them.

A 24-year-old man described the attack on Sheikh Zakzaky's house:

We were expecting trouble but not from soldiers. The day before, four of our members were killed in Gabai by local vigilantes...Gabai is about 10 kilometers from Zaria. So we were surprised to hear that soldiers were attacking Hussainiyah. The Sheikh decided we should go and pray at Daral-Rahma [cemetery]. But the Sheikh's wife became jittery because she had heard on the news that soldiers said we wanted to kill the army boss. Someone had helped the Sheikh's young children escape from Hussainiyah. So when they brought them to meet us at Daral-Rahma, we decided to go home.

We met a large crowd when we got to the house. They said they heard soldiers were coming toward the Sheikh's house. It was not until about 10 p.m. that the soldiers started shooting. We put up our own barricade to stop the soldiers from coming close. We were throwing stones at them because that was all we had to protect ourselves.

The shooting continued until 1a.m. on Sunday December 13. Then everything was quiet. Suddenly we heard a loud boom. The people in Hussainniya called to say bombs had been thrown into the center. We could hear the explosions continued until 5 a.m. when no voices came up on the phone again.

The soldiers reinforced and stormed the Sheikh's house at 9 a.m. We tried to stand our ground but they killed many of us, including my female friend, until they got into the house at 11 a.m. I saw at least 30 soldiers including one on a tank. I got shot and was in so much pain I could no longer stay. I went to the makeshift clinic members set up during the night to treat the injured. It was just three houses away. I was horrified at what I saw there. All the injured people we took there all night, the doctor and the two nurses helping him had been shot. I think they would have been more than 50 of them there. I ran when I got the chance.

The Islamic Movement of Nigeria

Sheik Zakzaky is a key figure in the growth of Islamic movements in Nigeria. In 1978, while a student at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, he was a prominent leader of Nigeria's Muslim Students Society, or the Muslim Brothers. In 1979, he became the national vice-president of the group. After traveling to Iran in 1980, he became a proponent of Shia Islam.

As his influence grew, there were frequent clashes between his group and some Sunni sects, in part because they resisted Shia use of mosques for prayer and other activities in northern Nigeria cities of Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto, among other towns. Nigerian security forces destroyed the IMN headquarters in Sokoto in July 2007, after clashes between Sunni and Shia groups following the shooting of a popular Sunni cleric.